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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is a problem in high schools, on college campuses, and in the workplace, although unclear definitions and misinterpretations of sexual harassment have led many to believe that the amount of sexual harassment that occurs is minimal. Sexual harassment has been defined as a continuum of behaviors, with physical sexual assault at one extreme and nonverbal, sexually suggestive behavior at the other extreme. Studies suggest that more females than males are victims of sexual harassment. Sexual harassers are usually males in a position of authority who can force the cooperation of the victim by coercion. Sexual harassment leads to fear, anxiety, guilt, and anger for the victims; many victims feel they should have done something to prevent the harassment. Persons who feel they are being harassed should take immediate, firm steps to stop the behavior. They should document the incidents in case a suit is filed. They can complain to the appropriate officers in their organization or to the state or federal agency that has jurisdiction in the matter. Some organizations have published written guidelines forbidding harassment and specifying the actions that should be taken by persons who feel they have been harassed. (KC)

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MONOGRAPH

SEXUAL HARASSMENT:

AN OVERVIEW

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College of Education
Instructional Materials Laboratory

Volume 2, Number 1, February 1987

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MONOGRAPH

SEXUAL HARASSMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Many people involved in high schools, college campuses, and employment situations talk about sexual harassment as a passing agenda. Research in this area suggests that men and women do not have a clear understanding about what constitutes a sexual harassment situation or problem. This is due primarily to the historical acceptance of sexual harassment as a private rather than a public issue. Also, the traditional socialization of men (to accept aggressive behavior) and women (to reject aggressive behavior) interferes with the interpretation of what is considered courting, flirting, or sexually harassing behaviors. The following statements help identify and clarify sexual harassment issues.

- —Sexual harassment **is** a problem in high schools, on college campuses, and in the workplace.
- —Women are sexually harassed **more** frequently than men.
- —Sexual harassment not only affects the person being harassed but **also** affects others around that person.
- —People who are in roles of authority, like teachers or supervisors, may be in a position to sexually harass others **but** are not the only persons who sexually harass others.
- —The way women dress and act is **not** necessarily an invitation to sexual harassment.
- —Saying *no* to sexual harassment does **not** necessarily cause it to stop.
- —Sexual harassment will **not** go away by denying its existence.
- —Most schools, colleges, and other organizations do **not** have adequate policies for handling sexual harassment issues.

People formulate opinions about sexual harassment based on their own experiences. Because our society is uncomfortable discussing sexual feelings and sexual issues, many observers and involuntary participants in sexual harassment situations are unwilling to discuss the existence of the problem. To avoid the unpleasantness of such an encounter, many of those involved choose to ignore the entire issue. Some even attempt to substitute a positive feeling toward the problem—interpreting sexual harassment as flattery, for instance—rather than admit to themselves and others their true feelings of helplessness or fear.

The unclear definitions and misinterpretations of sexual harassment have led many to believe that the amount of sexual harassment that occurs is minimal in schools, colleges, and the workplace. Once the problem of sexual harassment has been exposed and is understood, it is likely that individual harassers will be held more accountable for their behavior by both men and women.

This monograph is a collection of research on sexual harassment which defines the issue, describes how people are affected, suggests options for people who are sexually harassed, and offers preventative alternatives to promote at schools and other organizations.

LEGISLATION AND DEFINITIONS

Federal legislation, specifically Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex. The importance of this legislation is that it prohibits sex discrimination in employment. Subsequent federal legislation, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, established the unlawfulness of sex discrimination against students and employees in all educational institutions receiving

federal assistance. In addition, Title IX requires all educational institutions to establish grievance procedures for alleged discrimination on the basis of sex.

In 1978, Farley coined the term *sexual harassment* and identified this activity as a form of sex discrimination. She described sexual harassment as an act that involves unsolicited, nonreciprocal, aggressive male behavior directed toward a female. Prior to this date, no name existed for this type of behavior. In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission developed *Guidelines on Discrimination Because of Sex*, which offered a more complete definition of sexual harassment.

> Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when 1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; 2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; 3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating or offensive working environment. (Congressional Federal Register, 1980, p. 74676)

Under these guidelines, an employer is responsible for the acts of his or her employees, regardless of whether the employer knew about the sexual harassment or not.

By 1981, the Office for Civil Rights of the United States Department of Education developed a working definition of sexual harassment.

> Sexual harassment consists of verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, imposed on the basis of sex, by an employee or agent of a recipient that denies, limits, provides different or conditions the provision of aid, benefits, services or treatment protected under Title IX. (Office for Civil Rights, 1981)

Few laws specifically prohibit sexual harassment; however, with the passage of those previously mentioned laws, it is clear that the issue of sexual harassment is gaining more attention. Previous unclear definitions of sexual harassment had created anxiety about human interactions. Today, this anxiety exists as some people struggle to determine the difference between sexual harassment and courting behavior. The clear difference between those two behaviors is that one is unwelcome behavior and the other is welcome.

Sexual harassment has been defined as a continuum of behaviors, with physical sexual assault at one extreme and nonverbal, sexually suggestive behavior at the other extreme. Specific types of physical harassment include unwanted touching, patting, grabbing, or pinching; extending an overly friendly arm around the shoulder; brushing up against a person's body; kissing or attempting to kiss; coercing sexual intercourse; and committing physical assault or rape. Specific verbal and/or nonverbal behavior that is sexually harassing can be identified as follows: insulting sounds or whistles, conversations that are too personal, offensive verbalizations, sexually suggestive remarks, humor and jokes about sex, derogatory comments about the opposite sex, inappropriate comments about the body, offers of money for sex, constant embarrassing comments, obscene gestures, or staring in a way too personal.

Sexual harassment occurs when sexual language or behavior is unwanted, unwarranted, and threatens the ability of individuals to participate and benefit freely from that environment. Some examples of sexual harassment within the educational setting follow.

—Bob was the only boy in the cosmetology class. All the girls in the class teased him and made fun of him. One girl really gave him a hard time, making sexual remarks and suggestions. When he told the teacher, she replied that he had better get used to the harassment if he wanted to be a cosmetologist.

—Christine was one of the few girls in her welding class. She wanted to take more welding classes, but the teacher frequently belittled the girls and had them sweeping the floor and taking attendance. She knew she was not getting the experience she needed, but the teacher told her not to worry and winked at her.

—A teacher frequently asked students to stay after school just to talk. This teacher was known to hug and touch students, and gave better grades to those who would stay late and comply.

—A male student and some of his friends kept making sexual remarks to one particular girl. They pressed her against a classroom door and kept her from leaving. She often was embarrassed by the rude comments they made about her body.

Sexual harassment is an invasion of privacy and a violation of a person's rights. Harassing activity implies an imbalance in power whereby one person dominates the other or intimidates the person to force consent. There is a certain power that is derived from either the educational or occupational setting that gives the harasser a certain claim to control. Sexual harassment is a way a person forces sexual attention on someone who does not want it.

WHO IS AFFECTED

Studies suggest that more females than males are victims of sexual harassment. Surveys have typically found that females are two to three times more

likely than males to report having been the target of sexual harassment. If the occurrence of sexual harassment, as suggested in research, reflects reality, then it appears that about half of all women will face sexual harassment on the job or during their education.

One of the problems in collecting information about sexual harassment is that the subject is sensitive. Therefore, many respondents are unwilling to discuss harassing experiences with anyone. This suggests that the actual occurrence of sexual harassment may be much higher than what has been reported.

In 1981, the United States Merit System Protection Board (USMSPB) sampled 23,000 federally employed men and women over a two-year period. Forty-two percent of the women and 15% of the men reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. Somers' (1983) research cited studies that reported the incidence of sexual harassment among female employees to be as high as 92%. One half reported they had been fired or knew someone who had been fired because of sexual harassment. Research conducted by Benson and Thomson (1982) found that 30% of the undergraduate women at the University of California, Berkeley, had been sexually harassed at some time during their four years of study. In another college study involving 1,178 students, Schneider (1982) found that 17% of the women and 2% of the men reported being sexually harassed by their teachers.

This author could find no research conducted with students below the college level. This is not to suggest that sexual harassment does not exist between teachers and students at lower levels. In addition, no research was found that discusses the existence of sexual harassment between teachers and administrators below the college level. The concern here is that if the issue is not being discussed and revealed, then students may be learning at a young age that sexual harassment is appropriate behavior; therefore, in future interactions in the workplace, they may accept the behavior rather than confront it.

[illegible] HARASSER

Sexual harassment occurs when a person who is in a position to control, influence, grade, or pay another person uses this position of authority to coerce the other person into unwanted, sexually suggestive situations and to threaten punishment if she or he refuses to comply. The act of sexual harassment is one way a harasser can control his or her environment by utilizing intimidating behaviors to force the cooperation of the victim (Hemming, 1985). In one study it was determined that 75% of the male harassers were in a position to hire or fire female employees (Sechler, 1981). Sexual harassers almost always act alone, and frequently harass other targets. In addition, the harassing behavior often is directed toward the victim consistently over a long period of time (USMSPB, 1981).

Research conducted by Tangri and Johnson (1982) and Farley (1978) indicates that sexually harassing behaviors are most often conducted by men who are older, in positions of high status, married, and somewhat unattractive. On the other hand, men who report being sexually harassed by women identify the women as being younger, single, and attractive. More women than men have been harassed by their superiors (Hemming, 1985).

WHO IS HARASSED

Research conducted in the area of sexual harassment has identified women as being the most likely to be harassed. The following list describes women who are commonly harassed:

-single and divorced women
-women trainees
-younger and older women
-women pioneers in nontraditional careers
-lower-salaried women
-women with high dependence on their job
-women in graduate school near the age of the instructor
-minority women
-unassertive or passive women
-women who appear to be confident

In a 1981 USMSPB survey of federal workers, it was found that males who reported being the target of sexual harassment were most likely to report that the incident involved homosexual harassment. While this research concluded that few men are being sexually harassed by women, Pryor's (1985) research recognizes the existence of this behavior by women. Because women tend to consider sexual advances as more threatening than men (Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, 1983), perhaps this accounts for the low reporting and labeling of sexual harassment of men by women.

THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Morris, Terpstra, Croninger, and Linn (1985) have identified the following warning signals of sexual harassment. If an individual has any of these thoughts, it is likely that he or she is being harassed.

-I can't believe this is happening to me.
-I hate you for doing this to me.
-If I say anything, everyone will think I'm crazy.
-Just leave me alone.
-What is going to happen next?
-I wish I could get away from all this.
-Why doesn't anyone help me?

Many of those who are sexually harassed are unwilling to discuss the experience until years later, and often hesitate to call it sexual harassment (Somers, 1982). They often blame themselves and believe that others, upon learning about the incident, would blame them too. Because of this, those harassed often feel isolated from the very people who could support them. Sexual harassment can provoke many emotional responses. Some of the more common emotional responses include the following:

-anxiety
-fear
-guilt
-frustration
-loneliness
-hatred
-jealousy
-confusion
-anger
-defeat
-self-consciousness
-powerlessness

Many of those who have been sexually harassed feel they should have done something to prevent it. They appear to be somewhat apologetic. Some fear the expression of the anger they feel because they want to guard against being seen as a troublemaker. This masked anger eventually explodes into defensiveness. Often people fear the sexual harassment will be repeated. Sexually harassed persons may lose their self-confidence and may feel their self-image is damaged.

Hemming (1985) identifies some possible physical consequences of sexual harassment. Sleeplessness and tiredness, migraine headaches, coronary heart disease, problems with weight and diet, and other physical illnesses can occur as a result of being sexually harassed. Some sexually harassed persons abuse drugs and alcohol to escape the pressure and anguish caused by the harassment.

Other consequences of sexual harassment can include a decrease in job satisfaction and a barrier to long-term career prospects. For example, a harasser could encourage lack of cooperation from coworkers; offer negative job evaluations or poor personal recommendations; deny overtime; demote the victim; provide injurious transfer and reassignments of shifts, hours, or locations of work; set impossible performance standards; and/or demand the termination of the employee (Farley, 1978).

Even though sexual harassment affects people in different ways, no research has identified any positive consequences derived from it.

Before sexual harassment can be dealt with, it is necessary to understand the nature of this particular behavior and the prevalence of the problem. In addition, people need to understand their rights as students and/or employees and the appropriate ways of confronting sexual harassment. As a social problem, this type of behavior can be difficult to identify and prove. Cultural and individual differences exist in communication patterns; thus, what one considers sexual harassment, another may not. It is possible that some harassers actually may not know that others find their behavior unacceptable.

If you or someone you know is being harassed, it is best to take some action to discontinue or prevent this type of behavior. The situation is likely to worsen if the harassed person remains silent. Overlooking obvious sexually harassing behaviors may indicate the acceptance of this behavior. Suggestions on how to deal with sexual harassment include the following:

—Do not laugh at the harassing behavior.
—Share your problem with an adult friend, family member, or colleague.
—Review your organization's policies and procedures on sexual harassment.
—Discuss the issue with a knowledgeable person in the organization; for example, a supervisor, director of personnel, equal employment opportunity officer, or affirmative action officer. (It is important to go to the appropriate official before complaints of incompetence filter down.)
—Avoid being alone with the harasser.
—Talk with other students or coworkers to see if they have been harassed. Complaints from a group carry more weight than those from an individual.
—Keep a written record documenting as precisely as possible what happened, when it took place, and any witnesses. This will be important if charges are filed.
—Ask witnesses to verify your experience.
—Make it known in front of other people that this type of behavior is offensive and unacceptable.
—Give the harasser a firm *no* at the first sign of sexual harassment. Tell the harasser, in person or by letter, that this behavior is unacceptable.

Employees and students have the legal right to work and learn in an environment free from discriminatory intimidation, ridicule, and insult. Although only a few cases on sexual harassment have ever been won legally, recent court rulings have made organizations more responsible for this behavior. Federal action can be taken by contacting the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC 20506. A complaint to this organization should be filed within 180 days of the last alleged harassment. State action can be taken by contacting the State Equal Opportunity Division (EEO), 30 East Broad

Street, Columbus, Ohio 43266-0408. A complaint to this organization should be filed within 30 days after the last alleged harassment. A sexually harassed person is not required to initially file a grievance with his or her institution; however, some institutions will not handle grievances after they have been filed with state or federal EEO offices. Further information about sexual harassment can be obtained through the Office for Civil Rights, Region V, 300 South Wacker Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60606, and the Committee Against Sexual Harassment, 65 South Fourth Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215.

There are many ways that schools and other organizations can identify, confront, and prevent sexual harassment. For example, a survey among students and employees could determine the extent of the problem. Organizations could develop presentations and other programs to educate students, faculty, employees, and supervisors of the sensitive issues surrounding sexual harassment.

Title VII and Title IX are important pieces of legislation that indicate sexual harassment in the workplace or academic environment is illegal. Each organization should develop a specific policy statement regarding sexual harassment and identify what constitutes sexual harassment. A sample of the actual guidelines posted by Akron Public Schools follows.

AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS HOW TO REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The Akron Public Schools prohibits any form of sexual harassment. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Guidelines—Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964--specify that all Akron Public Schools' employees are entitled to a work environment free from sexual harassment and intimidation.

Sexual harassment is a form of misconduct that undermines the integrity of the employment relationship. It is an attempt to control, influence, or affect the career, salary, or job of an individual. Sexual harassment may include, but is not limited to

- Creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment;
- Repeated offensive sexual flirtations;
- Advances or propositions;
- Continued or repeated verbal abuse of a sexual nature;
- Graphic or degrading verbal comments about an individual or his or her appearance;
- The display of sexually suggestive objects or pictures; and
- Any offensive or abusive physical contact.

If you have questions or concerns regarding sexual harassment, contact your immediate superior or William W. Spratt, Title IX Coordinator for the Akron Public Schools, or any other representative of the Personnel Office.

Division of Personnel
and Administration
November 1984

Conrad C. Ott
Superintendent of Schools

Policy statements should be distributed to employees and students. In addition, people should be encouraged to file a complaint or discuss a potential violation. A complaint officer should be identified and should be familiar with the process of filing a grievance. The method of discipline for such behaviors should be known, and action should be taken immediately with regard to the victim's privacy. It appears that one of the best ways to handle the sexual harassment problem is to offer as many awareness opportunities as possible and to implement an ongoing preventative program.

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